
Prospects for Peace in South Asia

By

Christina Rocca
Assistant Secretary of State for South Asian Affairs

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Introduction, Conflict in the Region

I am pleased to be here today to discuss the prospects for peace in South Asia. This subject is central to the goals of the United States, and to the interests of the international community in the region. I know that a principal concern of this gathering today is the continuing crisis between India and Pakistan, and I will review current administration thinking on this issue.

But it is also important to keep in mind that there are other, quite serious, conflicts in South Asia. I think that these also need to be included in any discussion of stability and the prospects for peace in the region. I know that the situation in Afghanistan was taken up at a separate session this morning, so I do not intend to address it except to the extent it influences other developments in South Asia. But I would like to talk about Sri Lanka, where there are some indication that an almost twenty-year conflict may be on the way to resolution, and about Nepal, where a rural insurgency has grown over the past five years to threaten the future of a country struggling to establish prosperity and democracy.

India-Pakistan

Throughout South Asia, the search for prosperity and democracy is too often overshadowed by the specter of war. The most prominent case in the region, of course, is the continuing crisis between India and Pakistan. Twice so far this year, the possibility of war between India and Pakistan became very real. Hundreds of thousands of Indian and Pakistani troops were mobilized along their border and the Line of Control in Kashmir. These crises were generated by extremely provocative terrorist attacks, first against the Indian parliament in New Delhi last December, and then against families of Indian soldiers in Jammu in May. The forces of extremism once again sought to exploit the deep and long-standing differences between India and Pakistan over Kashmir.

They did not succeed, and tensions have been reduced since then thanks to decisions made in Islamabad and New Delhi, with the encouragement of the international community. But we, and the rest of the international community remain deeply concerned. The military mobilization continues. The rhetoric, though muted, could bubble up again. Another major terrorist attack or a significant surge in violence could still spark a military confrontation, with long-lasting and devastating consequences for the entire region. The enemies of moderation in the region are aware of this fact and have already tried to exploit it through high-profile terrorist attacks. They could very well try again.

We need to recognize that an important factor in the current crisis is the willingness of extremists and terrorists to go to any length to reach their goals. Our efforts to prevent conflict between India and Pakistan are made even more urgent by the global war on terrorism. President Musharraf, recognizing the danger that extremism poses to his country, has denounced the senseless ideology of violence. Pakistani authorities have moved against extremist groups. The

extremists, showing how threatened they feel by President Musharraf's actions, have struck back. The government has not been intimidated; instead it has continued its campaign against terrorists and their supporters. We are standing by Pakistan as it faces this brutal challenge.

Secretary Powell has said that war is just not an option in resolving the differences between India and Pakistan it will only make the situation worse, probably much worse. The only realistic way forward is the path of dialogue and confidence building. The Secretary has also publicly recognized that Kashmir is now on the international agenda. Given the potential cost of a conflict, the international community has focused on the need to reduce tension and demobilize. No one from the outside can impose a settlement, but we must work to help the two sides further de-escalate current tensions and begin to tackle the more fundamental differences between them.

Both sides have reaffirmed their desire for a peaceful political solution to their differences. President Musharraf has pledged that his government will provide no support for infiltration across the Line of Control, and that he will not permit Pakistan to be used as a base for terrorist attacks in any other country. Pakistan needs to sustain that pledge in order to begin a process of resolution of the immediate crisis and of its more fundamental differences with India. We also look to India to take further de-escalatory actions, as Pakistan carries through with its commitments. As tensions begin to subside, New Delhi should agree to resume talks with Islamabad on all issues, including Kashmir. During his recent meetings with Indian leaders in New Delhi, Secretary Powell saw that there was a solid commitment to dialogue. He said that India understands that their dialogue had to include all the issues between the two nations but especially it had to include Kashmir.

Kashmir

The problems of Kashmir cannot be resolved through violence, but only through a healthy political process and dialogue between the parties. We look forward to India holding free and fair state elections beginning later this month. We also encourage a continuation and expansion of the nascent efforts to engage Kashmir separatist leaders. Kashmir's, Pakistanis and Indians must do their part to ensure that the upcoming elections can be held in safety and without interference from those who would like to spoil them. Recent attacks on officials and political party activists in Kashmir cannot be allowed to derail the election.

State elections can be an important step in a political process, but they alone cannot resolve the problems between India and Pakistan, nor can they erase the scars of so many years of strife. Only a productive and sustained bilateral dialogue on all issues, including Kashmir, will prevent future crisis and finally bring peace to the region. We are committed to staying engaged, in the months and years ahead, helping both parties resolve their differences so that everyone in the region can live in dignity, prosperity and security.

Sri Lanka

As I said earlier, there are other serious conflicts in South Asia, in which thousands have died, and thousands more can die if they are not resolved. I will touch briefly on the situations in Sri Lanka and Nepal. I hope that our discussion after the opening remarks will include some attention to these situations. Recent developments in Sri Lanka have been encouraging and give us cause for cautious optimism. After almost two decades of war, costing well over 60,000 lives, a serious peace process is now under way. A cease fire has been in place since late last year. Norway, which has been acting as a facilitator, recently announced that the Sri Lankan government and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam have agreed to begin the first round of formal talks on September 16 in Thailand. The government's announcement yesterday that it was lifting its ban on the Tamil Tigers as part of the peace process is another welcome development.

The United States has supported Norway's efforts and we are continuing to watch developments very closely. We hope that the talks will eventually bring to an end this bitter conflict. The Norwegian government has played a key role in bringing the two sides together in what appears to be a major step forward. We wish them, and the Sri Lankan parties, continued success in their efforts toward peace. A negotiated political settlement to this conflict would be the best demonstration that negotiation not violence provides the most effective means for dealing with contentious issues that divide and separate peoples throughout the world.

We believe that such a settlement is possible if both parties continue to demonstrate the constructive and serious approach that has brought the process to this point. The people of Sri Lanka deserve nothing less. Everyone should understand, however, that the path to peace will not be smooth and that this is just the first step on that journey. The United States strongly supports the Sri Lankan peace process, as the President affirmed in July when he met with the Sri Lankan Prime Minister in Washington. Deputy Secretary of State Armitage recently concluded a successful visit to Sri Lanka, which included meetings with the government, the opposition, and Tamil leaders. Mr. Armitage emphasized the U.S. commitment to peace in Sri Lanka and our desire to help that country realize its great potential. We will continue to urge a negotiated settlement, which has as its goal a nation that is whole, at peace, and respects the rights of all of its citizens.

Nepal

I wish we could have as much optimism over an early end to the conflict in Nepal. That country continues to confront a violent Maoist insurgency, now in its sixth year, which has left over 4,000 dead. The Maoists have employed ruthless tactics in the field and conducted terrorist attacks against both government targets and innocent civilians. We acknowledge the Nepal government's right and duty to protect its citizens, within the framework of its constitution. Unfortunately, the leaders of Nepal's ruling political party are locked in a power struggle that inhibits the government's effectiveness in dealing with the insurgents and undertaking development initiatives to start restoring its authority in the countryside. The United States is finalizing plans for assistance as part of an international response to end this brutal conflict and help bring peace to Nepal. Our programs are intended to facilitate the government's efforts both to restore security and to focus on development and poverty reduction.

To truly end this conflict, the government and people of Nepal must build a better future for their country. Nepalis must hold their officials accountable for good governance and ending corruption. All must work to find the common ground on which to begin rebuilding what the Maoists have destroyed. We can assist in that reconstruction by continuing to aid Nepal's economic development. Peace can provide the space in which Nepal can diversify its economy, attract foreign investment, and seek sustainable and environmentally sound ways to tap the potential of its natural resources. While much remains to be done, many in the international community stand ready to assist.

Continued U.S. Engagement

These then are three of the four major conflicts in South Asia. All need to be resolved to truly have peace in the region. It is our intention that the United States does what it can to move toward resolution of each one. As Secretary Powell said in his visit to the region in July, what the United States is trying to do is to play the role of a friend, a good friend to all the nations of South Asia. He observed that our relations with all of the nations of the region are perhaps better than at any time in the last quarter century. And noted that if we are seen as a good partner then we can be in a position to perhaps assist nations in resolving their differences. Not as a meddler nor as a

mediator, but somebody whose good offices can help bring people to the table to deal with their differences. We hope that we will be able to play this role in the region.